

REMARKS ON SOME NEW APPROACHES  
TO SANSKRIT LITERATURE

The twentieth century has seen the development of general linguistics and, simultaneously, a certain number of attempts to determine the specificity of literary discourse in relation to neutral or everyday language. I would simply like to recall some remarks which have been formulated on this subject. These are, of course, not exhaustive. Although I will limit myself to the field of poetry, these remarks may also be considered applicable to various forms of narrative.

I will address myself first to the problem of the methodology adopted by literary semiotics. Until recently, literary texts — in particular the texts which are the furthest removed from us such as Sanskrit texts — have always been studied by taking an external approach. We would concentrate on the author's life, or on the history of the text itself, or on the time period, or on the literary influences.

Speaking specifically of the Sanskrit literary text, it is not merely a subject of philological study, enabling us to examine the language and its evolution, although it performs this function as well, and although this type of study is both necessary and worthwhile. Neither is it a well of information about the author (when his identity is known), or the history, or the geography, or the social cultural background, although these factors are interesting (I have in mind the works published about Kālidāsa and Daṇḍin for instance). On the other hand, biographical, historical or sociological information can shed light on a text, but can never account for its literary specificity.

Neither is the text the place for a psychological study of the heroes of plays or epic verses: either we repeat the classifications developed in the *alaṃkāraśāstra*, or we run the risk of superimposing western thought categories in an arbitrary manner.

We should not be satisfied either with establishing a thematic repertory, a list of subjects generally accepted by literary convention. This leads us inevitably into uninteresting generalizations as these

themes are necessarily limited in all poetry of whatever culture and are likely to resemble one another. Having noted that poems deal with Love, Separation, Devotion and Renunciation, we will not have come closer to understanding their specific characteristics as Sanskrit poems.

Hand in hand with these philological, sociological and historical methods of research which, we would like to underline, are absolutely necessary and which we are not proposing to replace, appears the need for an internal approach to the text. These two approaches are both necessary and parallel, and both should be respected in light of their differences and their complementarity.

### *The internal approach*

What does this internal approach consist of?

The literary text should not only be considered from the point of view of content. It is not only a message-bearer, a support for discourse which must be decoded in order to discover the one and only meaning. But the text itself constitutes the message. Literary language is not transparent. The word is felt as a word and not just as a substitute of the object named or as an explosion of emotion. Thus we can say that poetic language is opaque or even « autotelic » (I mean that it targets itself). It is never a transparent medium.

It is mainly to the linguist Roman Jakobson that we owe this new approach to the poetic text. He defines, among other functions of language, a poetic function, characterized by the perception of language in itself and revealing the tangible aspects of signs.

In a famous statement<sup>1</sup>, Jakobson says that the fundamental principle of all poetic procedures is the promotion of the principle of equivalence to the rank of constituent element of the sequence. In other words, the law of equivalence or similarity applies not only to the selection of units in the paradigmatic reserve (as in language functioning referentially) but imposes itself also on the syntagmatic sequence.

This thesis has important consequences for the study of poetic texts.

First of all, if the literary text is its own message, it must be considered self-contained, having its own time and space. It has no referent, which does not mean that it is cut off from exterior reality, but simply means that that relation is irrelevant to the study of the text. The literary text is a functioning whole, of which we must consider each part in relation to all the others. The poem, properly speaking, does not have a meaning independent of its internal structure, of its oppositions and parallelisms between figures and themes. To take a famous example, what is the *Meghadūta* independently of the patterning of each of its

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1. Cf. R. JAKOBSON, *Essais de linguistique générale*, Paris, 1963 (reed.), p. 220.

stanzas, and of the way in which the stanzas work together? To try to isolate the real meaning would lead us to make a dull paraphrase.

The second consequence of this thesis is that it enables us to focus the study on poetic devices, of which the most important is repetition. The principle of parallelism and thus repetition is to be found at the heart of all poetic procedures and can be studied on several levels:

— on the phonic level of sounds and letters. The traditional example is the Jakobson-Lévi-Strauss study of the poem « Cats » by Baudelaire. The repetitions introduce, in the semantic organization of the text, oppositions and connections which are not explicitly mentioned on the ordinary linguistic level;

— on the grammatical level. The repetitions draw attention to the grammatical elements by abstracting them from the automatic associations that they possess in everyday language, and by arranging them purposely into columns of antonyms and synonyms;

— on the discursive level. Repetition can extend to the stanza, to transphrastic blocks, more or less large, to figures of speech etc.

What should be emphasized is that the literary text constructs in the language a second model of functioning based on the primary model of natural language. It is this secondary model which lets us pinpoint the specificity of a certain text or poem, which allows us to say, for instance, to what extent a poem is characteristic of the Sanskrit tradition (or of the Jain or Buddhist tradition). And it is this model also which confers on the poem its status as a unique and autonomous work.

In taking this internal approach, semioticians do not differ very much from Indian critics who thought of literature as a thing in itself, which can be judged according to formal criteria.

We can draw a conclusion from that analysis: it has to do with comparison which can be established between texts of different traditions. Before being able to compare an Indian text with a western one, and to remark upon their fundamental resemblances and differences, it is necessary to establish their specificity. It is because the Sanskrit literary text has been considered as a transparent discourse, that is to say because it was believed possible to separate form and content, that all the facile comparisons that we know have been arrived at: for instance Shakespeare and Kālidāsa, or *Bhagavad Gītā* and Christian philosophy. It would be more appropriate to study the structure of Kālidāsa's plays, or to situate the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the function of its place within the Epic.

I would like to stress a second point of methodology which is a result of this internal approach to texts. The literary discourse is a language of connotation and must be considered as having several meanings.

### *Connotation as a specificity of literary language*

The linguists who have recently devoted themselves to the definition of literary discourse have relied on the theory of a language of connotation developed by Hjelmslev.

Hjelmslev distinguishes between a language of denotation and a language of connotation; « its level of expression is made up of the levels of content and of expression of the language of denotation »<sup>2</sup>.

This implies several consequences which are equally important. The level of expression is as important as the level of content. It is from this level of expression that we can organize the meaning of the literary text. There are no more accessory details that we could arrange in order of importance, or could consider irrelevant, for instance alliterations, puns, *yamakās*, *śleṣas* etc. which are of prime importance in Indian poetry and which we tend to consider as childish games, ascribed to another age and a far off civilization. All kinds of riddles or puns are just as important as other procedures which we find more noble because we imagine them to be more closely related to the content. This is a view which should be entirely reassessed.

To quote another well-known example, Kālidāsa himself uses these games of the signifier in a very interesting way: the *Meghadūta* presents several repetitions of homophones. In stanza 63, *Alakā*, the name of the town of the exiled Yakṣa echoes the vocable *alaka-* which means « a curl of hair ». The two words bear no semantic relation to each other, nonetheless, their relationship contributes to the creation of the erotic atmosphere of the poem (the *rasa*) in the same manner as the *upamā* which identify rivers and women, cloud and lover.

The extent of the use of these games of the signifier leads us to the anagrams the importance of which has been pointed out by F. de Saussure. There are « words under words » to quote a contemporary critic (Starobinsky). Every text is a producer of other texts which may be read through the first.

The existence of such a language of connotation and the importance of the level of expression implies that the text does not possess one unique meaning which can be defined once and for all. There are many possible readings which vary according to time, context and recipients. It is certain — to take an extreme example — that the meaning of a Sanskrit text will never be the same as it was for the original audience for which it was intended.

The Sanskrit literary text must be considered as containing a skein of meanings out of which no single thread of meaning can be extracted as the only sense fixed in one definitive interpretation.

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2. Cf. L. HJELMSLEV, *Prolégomènes à une théorie du langage*, Paris, 1968 (reed.), p. 161.

The multiplicity of meanings requires an active role on the part of the listener, which role is emphasized by contemporary semiotics when it declares that the reader constructs the meaning and contributes to the creation of the work. And it is interesting to notice that Sanskrit poetics has itself pointed out the role of the listener when it refers to a double inspiration, one — creative (*kārayitṛī*) — being the poet's inspiration, the other — receptive (*bhāvayitṛī*) — belonging to the reader. In pointing out the plurality of possible readings and the constructive role of the reader, we agree with the remarks of the Indian theorists themselves.

The multiplicity of readings of the language of connotation places it clearly in opposition to other textual works such as technical treatises like *śāstras*. The meaning is sometimes difficult to interpret because of philological problems or because of different thought categories. But they are not open to many interpretations. The Indian author understands this perfectly in his systematic opposition of *kāvya* and *śāstra*.

I would like to add that it is the potential richness of the literary text which allows several different readings such as sociological, ideological and psychanalytical.

### *Intertextuality*

Semiotic research presently stresses intertextuality which is something obvious, but which has long been unnoticed; we only understand a work of literature in reference to other works. We only perceive its meaning and structure in relation to archetypes themselves abstracted from long series of texts. This process is different from the problem of sources and influences, and has a much larger extent. A literary work can be defined only in relation to preexisting models which it tries to imitate, to modify or to transform. As a matter of fact, in Indian literature, the use of intertextuality is particularly striking. We can see the results of this on several levels:

- on the level of the origin of the work;
- on the level of its internal organization;
- on the level of its decoding and interpretation.

a) Sanskrit literary texts always appear to be dependent. Subjects and forms are borrowed, the poet is not concerned with innovation and personal inspiration. This obvious fact raises a problem: the question is why is this so?

We can observe that, in our own culture, there are periods of intertextual crisis, for instance the Renaissance (Rabelais) or the beginning of the twentieth century (Joyce). But in India, intertextuality is a per-

manent and intense phenomenon. We can try to explain this by the hypothesis of an hypercodification of the literary text. The Indian tradition presents a certain number of very specific and relatively restrained forms, amongst which the author must choose. We can trace here the overwhelming influence of Sanskrit poetics: the poetic devices in *kāvya* are strictly codified as much on the level of form as on that of content. The models thus established are endlessly repeated, with identical features. There is no room for erratic forms, for short poems (models, that, after all, the Veda could have generated) unless they are collected in didactic and gnomic anthologies.

However, there are works which appear to transgress that codification partially and which, in their turn, give rise to other works. This is the case of the *Meghadūta*, which does not enter into any well-defined genre, but which creates one: that of the *dūtakāvya*, of which there are about fifty examples.

We are led to consider the problem of genres in Sanskrit poetry. When we speak of lyric and epic styles, we are imposing western categories on an Indian reality. This is particularly noticeable in the case of the so-called « novel » which owes much to both the short story and to the *kāvya*, but does not correspond at all to the western novel. Much remains to be done to reveal the archetypes and, thereby, define the genres which can truly be called Indian.

b) If compared with its western counterpart, Indian intertextuality can be seen to offer very few parodies but many imitations. Here, intertextuality is explicit and self-proclaiming. Either form or content can be borrowed. This process gives rise to different figures: enlarging a borrowed episode (for example the *Kirātārjunīya* develops a passage of the *Mahābhārata*) or condensation (the *Rāmāyaṇa* is condensed in the *Raghuvamśa*). Sometimes, the borrowing extends to figures of speech: the *Kumārasaṃbhava* echoes the *Śivapurāṇa* and presents several examples of the figure *utprekṣā* borrowed from the *purāṇa*. Sometimes, entire blocks are borrowed and inserted into another text.

What is the status of these borrowed passages? The original text, when quoted, takes on another value, bears another meaning. It no longer denotes, but also connotes. The new level of meaning thus created demands a study in depth.

c) Generally speaking, Indian intertextuality reflects a specific cultural background and collective memory. It results from a very different sensitivity to repetition. Originality here is not judged according to the same standards: it depends more on variations on a given theme (variations which can be infinite and extremely subtle on a formal level) than on actual invention of a personal theme. Thus Indian intertextuality reflects esthetic criteria which are very different from ours. The writers were probably more preoccupied with codification than those of our culture. This would reinforce the very Indian conviction that

natural or unconstrained literary discourse does not exist. It is a well-known fact that this concept of poetry as an extremely ordered activity extends even to the poet's own life, of which every minute or detail is accounted for, as the *Kāvya-mīmāṃsā* tells us.

Naturally, this intertextuality tends to render our reading highly imperfect, because we do not belong to the same culture and because the totality of texts is not within our memory.

In any case, these new directions of research show us that, if on the one hand, for methodological reasons, the text should be considered as a self-contained whole, we must also go beyond the text in order to relate it to the totality of literary works and, consequently, to its socio-cultural background.